

Glossary

Acceptable compromise

The situations that give rise to environmental health issues are often complex and involve competing interests. An acceptable solution for one group of stakeholders does not always meet the needs of others, or the best solution is not scientifically, economically, or physically viable. Between these "endpoints" is a compromise that meets some of the needs of some of the groups. It is almost an oxymoron to talk about a compromise as acceptable, since it retreats from what might have been determined to be ethically most appropriate given the situation.

Sustainable development

Sustainable development is a compromise between the demands of economic development for the present and near future and the demands of sustaining the resources necessary to ensure future viability.

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." In other words, "Our soils, waters, forests, and minerals are not inexhaustible. Farms, industries, homes, and lifestyles must become more sustainable in every community on our planet. To be sustainable, development must improve economic efficiency, protect and restore ecological systems, and enhance the well-being of all peoples." (<http://www.iisd.org/sd/>). We need, that is, to continue to provide jobs for people, while simultaneously ensuring that economic growth and development do not further damage the environment. Some people regard this as the most important challenge facing human civilization on Earth.

Environmental justice

Environmental justice issues arise because of a history of bad industrial and economic environmental consequences falling on the shoulders of predominantly minority and economically disadvantaged communities. Here is the government's full definition: "Environmental Justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. 'Fair treatment' means that no group of people, including a racial, ethnic, or a socioeconomic group, should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, municipal, and commercial operations or the execution of federal, state, local, and tribal programs and policies. 'Meaningful involvement' means that: (1) potentially affected community residents have an appropriate opportunity to participate in decisions about a proposed activity that will affect their environment and/or health; (2) the public's contribution can influence the regulatory agency's decision; (3) the concerns of all participants involved will be considered in the decision making process; and (4) the decision makers seek out and facilitate the involvement of those potentially affected." (Source: EPA, <http://www.epa.gov/compliance/environmentaljustice/index.html>)

Risk communication

Environmental health concerns must be communicated to the public. Health risk communications reach the public through the mass media in advertisements, news programs, newspapers, and magazines. The medical community, the CDC, and the EPA are also responsible for communicating health risks as they become known. The

ethical concerns of risk communication involve the complexity of severity assessments, public response, balancing informing the public and public panic.

Members of communities have vastly different levels of education, tolerance for uncertainty and trust of authorities (including scientific authority). Risks are, by their nature, probabilistic – meaning that one cannot speak with certainty about a future harm occurring, but needs to talk about *chances* of that harm occurring. Further, warning people of a risk too early (on the basis of too little evidence or too few reasons) might cause panic; but waiting too long might unnecessarily allow them to be exposed to harm without their consent.

Cost/benefit analysis

Cost/benefit analysis is a decision making tool for evaluating the effects of a decision over time. The value in the present is weighed against the environmental health cost to the future.

Resource allocation

The ethical question involved in resource allocation is, “What do I value?” Resource allocation requires the examination of needs versus the delicate and limited natural resources available to fill the need. Environmental health concerns arise in this area when our consumption needs have dangerous short or long-term public health consequences.

Stakeholders

Stakeholders are the people or groups with a direct interest and/or investment in environmental health issues, decisions, or events.

Problem definition

A well-defined problem is a problem half solved. How the problem is defined often shapes the information that is collected and used, and the thinking processes that are used to address it. Using ethical thinking, students often explore the situation before they even attempt to define the problem, and then they are encouraged to redefine it as they develop their understanding and search for solutions.

ⁱ World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). *Our common future*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987 p. 43.